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ZELENSKYY PROPOSES 10-POINT PEACE FORMULA TO JOE BIDEN

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy said his peace plan would result in joint security guarantees for decades ahead

ADDRESSES JOINT SESSION OF U.S. CONGRESS

Zelenskyy crossed into Poland early Wednesday, reaching the border town of Przemysl from where a US embassy vehicle took him to the Rzeszow airport. He, then, boarded a US Air Force jet which flew non-stop and landed at Joint Base Andrews. In Washington, Zelenskyy met US President Biden in the Oval Office and later addressed a joint session of the US Congress

UKRAINE MAY GET ADDITIONAL $45 BN IN AID

- The Ukrainian president also expressed the hope that the US Congress would pass the extra $45 billion in aid to the war-torn country to help it defend its "values and independence"
- "Your money is not charity," he told US lawmakers, adding: "It is an investment in the global security and democracy" | P12

$21.9 billion
TOTAL SECURITY ASSISTANCE COMMITTED BY BIDEN ADMINISTRATION TO UKRAINE SO FAR

CHENNAI • MADURAI • VIJAYAWADA • BENGALURU • KOCHI • HYDERABAD • VISAKHAPATNAM • COIMBATORE • KOZHIKODE • THIRUVANANTHAPURAM • BELAGAVI • BHUBANESWAR • SHIVAMOGGA • MANGALURU • TIRUPATI • TIRUCHY • TIRUNELVELI • SAMBALPUR • HUBBALLI • DHARMAPURI • KOTTAYAM • KANNUR • VILLUPURAM • KOLLAM • TADEPALLIGUDEM • NAGAPATTINAM • THRISSUR • KALABURAGI

2% arrivals to be tested from Saturday

Modi holds high-level meet, urges everyone to follow pandemic-appropriate behaviour

EXPRESS NEWS SERVICE
@ New Delhi

AMID a spike in Covid-19 cases globally, the government on Thursday announced random sampling of 2% of all international arrivals at airports from 10 am on Saturday. Children under 12 will be exempted from sampling if they are not found to be symptomatic of Covid.

The Union health ministry in its advisory updated its Covid protocol for international fliers and at points of entry like airports, seaports and the land border. It included thermal screening and physical distancing.

The decision came after Prime Minister Narendra Modi held a high-level meeting and cautioned against complacency while urging everyone to follow Covid-appropriate behaviour, especially given the upcoming festive season, including wearing masks in crowded public places.

The meeting was held after Union health minister Mansukh Mandaviya, who had written to Congress leader Rahul Gandhi on Tuesday to follow the pandemic protocol during his Bharat Jodo Yatra or suspend it, informed Parliament that the Centre is keeping a close eye on new Covid variants and taking all possible steps to combat it.

As of now, India has four cases of the highly contagious Omicron sublineage BF.7, two each in Gujarat and Odisha. It's BF.7 that is driving the virus surge in China. Masks were back in Parliament with most members, including the prime minister, putting it on.

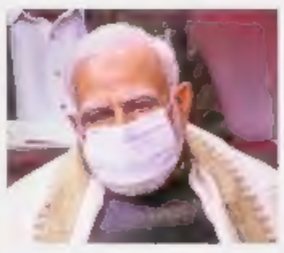
Avoid public gatherings

The Indian Medical Association (IMA) advised people to avoid public gatherings like marriages, political or social meetings, and international travel. It sought proactive steps to combat the virus

In the review meeting, Modi directed officials to strengthen surveillance and stressed the need to ensure that the entire Covid infrastructure is maintained at a high level of preparedness in terms of equipment, processes and human resources.

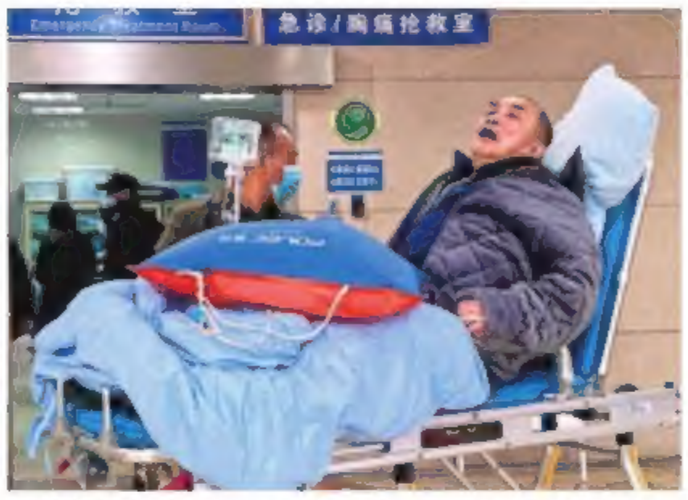
He advised states to audit Covid-specific facilities to ensure operational readiness, including oxygen cylinders, PSA plants and ventilators. He also directed officials to ramp up testing and genomic sequencing. Modi sought a fresh push to booster doses, especially for vulnerable and elderly groups.

In Parliament, Mandaviya said the Covid positivity rate in the country was down to 0.14% in the week ending December 22 though infection cases were spiralling in a few countries.



AIR SUVIDHA

The government weighing options to reintroduce the 'Air Suvidha' forms with details of RT-PCR test conducted 72 hours prior to travel or complete vaccination proof for fliers from countries reporting high Covid cases



An elderly Covid patient lies on a stretcher at the emergency ward of the First Affiliated Hospital of Chongqing Medical University in China on Thursday | AFP

K'TAKA MAKES COVID TEST MUST FOR ILI AND SARI CASES FROM TODAY

EXPRESS NEWS SERVICE
@ Belagavi/Bengaluru

IN the wake of reports on the spread of sub-variant of the Omicron virus in the country, the Karnataka government has issued an eight-point guideline to prevent the spread of the virus in the state. The decision was taken at a meeting chaired by Chief Minister Basavaraj Bommai and attended by Health Minister Dr K Sudhakar, members of a high-level advisory committee and senior officials of health department.

Sudhakar said wearing masks indoors and testing all Influenza Like Illness (ILI) and Severe Acute Respiratory Illness (SARI) cases have been made mandatory from Friday.

The minister said that in addition to testing ILI and SARI, 2 per cent of people arriving at hospitals would also be randomly tested. Masks have been made mandatory in spaces with air conditioners (ACs) as well. The oxygen plants set up at various hospitals will be maintained, Covid hospitals will be identified and private hospitals will also be directed to reserve beds for infected patients. The state will be in constant touch with the Central government and follow the proposed guidelines, he said.

Special vaccination camps will be organised to ensure 100 per cent coverage of the booster dose. The minister said people became lenient as the number of cases went down and did not come forward to take the booster dose. So far, only 20 per cent of people in Karnataka have been administered the booster dose. P3

New Bill to decriminalise minor offences in 42 Acts

EXPRESS NEWS SERVICE
@ New Delhi

THE Centre on Thursday introduced the Jan Vishwas Bill in the Lok Sabha, which seeks to decriminalise minor offences to promote ease of business. The Bill, tabled by Union commerce minister Piyush Goyal, proposes to amend 183 provisions across 42 Acts administered by 19 ministries including finance, commerce, environment, road transport and highways, ports and electronics.

The Bill was introduced amid protests by the Opposition over the recent clashes between Indian and Chinese troops at Tawang in Arunachal Pradesh.

Presenting the bill, Goyal said the government has adopted several measures to promote ease of doing business. He added that the government wants to do away with punishment provisions for minor offences.

"We have to trust people. For minor mistakes, people should not be punished. There should be a provision for paying fines for minor offences," he said.

The minister added that in order to decriminalise offences, the government has repealed about 1,500 old laws, introduced 3,500 norms and simplified 39,000 compliances. According to him, the proposed law will also help reduce the burden on the judiciary.

The bill also proposes the rationalisation of monetary penalties, depending on the gravity of the offence.

The Bill was later referred to a 31-member joint committee of Parliament for scrutiny.

The joint Parliamentary panel includes Lok Sabha MPs P P Chaudhary, Sanjay Jaiswal, Rajendra Agrawal, Poonam Pramod Mahajan, Gaurav Gogoi, A Raja, and Sougata Ray. The names of 10 members of the Rajya Sabha will be announced later.

The committee will be required to submit its report to Parliament in the second part of the Budget session next year.

OSCAR SHORTLIST

RRR, CHHELLO SHOW AMONG FOUR INDIAN FILMS

Chhello Show (best int'l film), RRR (original song), All that Breathes (documentary feature) and The Elephant Whisperers (documentary short) progressed to the next stage at the Oscars

EXPRESS READ

After Gadag boy's murder, mom succumbs

Gadag: Hadli village in Gadag district, where a teacher killed a student by throwing him off the first floor of the school building on Monday, was enveloped in a pall of gloom as Geeta Barker (36), who was the deceased student's mother and a teacher at the same school, died at KIMS Hospital | P5

CM's decision in 10 days, Panchamasalis end stir

Belagavi: CM Basavaraj Bommai will discuss legal aspects of including Lingayat Panchamasalis under the 2A reservation category and announce it officially within 10 days, said BJP senior leader Basangouda Patil Yatnal on Thursday. Soon after, the community members withdrew their protest | P4

TODAY'S INDULGE ANNIVERSARY ISSUE

96 PAGES

India, China hold talks amid fresh tensions

MAYANK SINGH @ New Delhi

AMID fresh tensions over the recent clashes between Indian and Chinese troops in the Tawang sector, India and China held a high-level military talks on the eastern Ladakh border standoff, according to a joint statement issued on Thursday.

The 17th round of Corps Commander-level meeting was held at the Chushul-Moldo border meeting point on the Chinese side of the Line of Actual Control on December 20. "Building on the progress made after the last meeting on 17th July 2022, the two sides exchanged views on the resolution of the relevant issues along the LAC in the western sector in an open and constructive manner," the joint statement read.

The meeting, which lasted for about 10 hours, took place 11 days after the clash at Yangtse area in the Tawang sector of Arunachal Pradesh.

The Indian side reportedly insisted on resolving the issues at the remaining friction points of Demchok and Depsang in eastern Ladakh.

The meeting resulted in "a frank and in-depth discussion, keeping in line with the guidance provided by the State leaders to work for the resolution of the remaining issues at the earliest, which would help in restoration of peace and tranquility along the LAC in the Western sector."

In the interim, the two sides agreed to maintain the security and stability on the ground in the western sector. It was also agreed to stay in "close contact" and maintain dialogue through military and diplomatic channels.

The 3,488 km long LAC is divided into eastern sector (Arunachal Pradesh and Sikkim), central sector (Uttarakhand and Himachal Pradesh) and western sector (Ladakh). The average height ranges from 10,000 ft at Arunachal Pradesh to over 18,700 ft at Karakoram Pass in Ladakh.

Stand on border unchanged, says K'taka Assembly

SUBHASH CHANDRA NS @ Belagavi

THE Karnataka Assembly on Thursday passed a unanimous resolution to condemn the statements of Maharashtra leaders over the border issue, and maintained there is no change in Karnataka's stand with regard to the Mahajan Commission report.

CM Basavaraj Bommai, who read out the resolution in the Assembly, said, "It has been 66 years now since the Mahajan Commission report was tabled. The Maharashtra-Karnataka border issue is a closed chapter." He pointed out that Maharashtra rejected the report and moved the Supreme Court in 2004. "As per Article 3 of the Constitution, only the Parliament has the power to review this issue," he said, and informed the Assembly that Karnataka will protect its land, water and language even if it needs to take the legal route. "We have constituted Karnataka Border and River Protection Committee, which is headed by retired Supreme Court judge, Justice Shivaraj Patil, and Supreme Court senior counsel Mukul Rohatgi and former advocate general Udaya Holla are members of it."

CM Basavaraj Bommai makes his point in the Assembly on Thursday | EXPRESS

Condemning the statement of Shiv Sena (Uddhav Balasaheb Thackeray) leader Sanjay Raut, who on Wednesday said that they will enter Karnataka using China-like stealth, Bommai called him a traitor.

"Raut does not understand the federal structure. He talks about invading Karnataka. He is an agent of China, a traitor," he said. On Maharastra minister Jayanth Patil's statement that he will not release water to Karnataka and will raise the height of the Koyna dam, he said that is not possible. P4

New startup policy to offer ₹100cr fund

EXPRESS NEWS SERVICE
@ Belagavi

THE state government has announced a new Karnataka Startup Policy 2022 which will be rolled out soon to give boost to 25,000 startups over the next five years. Under the policy, cleared by the cabinet on Thursday, a slew of incentives including ₹100 crore venture fund will be offered. The policy was formulated by the IT-BT and Science and Technology Department.

The ₹100-crore venture capital fund will support emerging innovative and deep-tech startups in AI, machine learning, electric vehicles, robotics, and drones. Startups will also get a one-time grant-in-aid of up to ₹50 lakh.

The policy aims for 50 new-age innovation networks (NAIN) in technology institutions of higher learning outside Bengaluru Urban district. Each NAIN will get a support of ₹5 lakh per student project for three years, and up to ₹12 lakh for operational expenditure, annually. The policy will also reserve 25% of the ₹100 crore venture capital for startups run by women, besides a direct loan of ₹10 lakh through Karnataka State Women Development Corporation. A centre for excellence for assistive technology will be set up with ₹15 crore assistance for innovative solutions for the differently-abled and senior citizens.

Advocate wants Suvarna Soudha on rent for b'day

NAUSHAD BIJAPUR @ Belagavi

THE Suvarna Vidhana Soudha in Belagavi becomes a ghost house once the winter session is over, said an advocate in a letter to the Chairman of the Legislative Council on Thursday, requesting him that the "white elephant" be rented out for celebrating his daughter's birthday.

For the ongoing winter session, the government is spending ₹37 crore.

Mallikarjun Choukashi, an advocate from Gokak taluk, stated, "My daughter completes five years and will be ready to take admission in Class 1. It will be a once in a lifetime moment for her. I request you to allow me to celebrate the event at the Soudha."

The government has also shown reluctance in shifting some state-level offices to the Soudha in Belagavi from Bengaluru even after leaders and organisations have been demanding it for years. Since 2006, winter sessions are being held in Soudha. The amount spent on sessions so far are: ₹8 crore in 2013, ₹14 crore (2014), ₹13 crore (2015), ₹16 crore (2016), ₹31 crore (2017), ₹13.85 crore (2018), and ₹32 crore (in 2021).

MULTIFACETED

Once free, Sobhraj plans globetrotting for documentary on his life

HOIHNU HAUZEL @ New Delhi

NOW that Nepal's Supreme Court has ordered the release of Charles Sobhraj, what might be the future road map for the French national?

"There are no more legal issues left in Nepal for him. He is a free man. Otherwise, the government would have already presented any remaining case or charge before the court," says his exuberant lawyer Gopal Siwakoti 'Chintan'.

It was six years after his release from India's Tihar jail that Sobhraj resurfaced in Nepal and was arrested in 2003. The Central Jail in Sundhara, a locality in the heart of Kathmandu, where he was lodged, has three blocks: the Central Prison, Bhadra Prison and Women Prison. Sobhraj is in the Central Prison's Golghar block in solitary confinement.

Chintan was one of the few people who interacted with Sobhraj regularly. When he was approached by the staff at Central Jail to lend legal advice to Sobhraj, the senior advocate was in two minds. Given his

Sobhraj (L) with Gopal Siwakoti (R)

"past record as reported in the media and found in books," he said he was a little hesitant.

"But later I thought it is not the work of a lawyer to pass judgement on anyone's past or present but service the rights and interests of a victimised person," says Chintan.

According to Chintan, lack of enthusiastic, effective and expert lawyers on prisoners' rights was the main reason that delayed his release. "Otherwise, the same legal case could have been made as soon as he had crossed the age of 65, which is some 14 years ago," he adds.

With time, Chintan began to see other sides to his client and realised there is more to him than the reputation he carries. Behind bars, Sobhraj devoured books. "I also very impressed with his knowledge of human rights and criminal jurisprudences of not only Nepal but also India, the UK, Europe, the US and of the UN system," he says. Of course, his "good manners, intelligence, hard-working nature and concern for his fellow inmates stood him in good stead," he adds.

In prison, Chintan says, Sobhraj took up the cases of thousands of fellow prisoners who had suffered unfair trials, inadequate food and nutrition, poor living conditions and the lack of proper space for sleep and clothes among others. He also filed a writ petition in the Nepal Supreme Court seeking adequate ration and proper healthcare for prisoners.

Sobhraj, who spoke to this writer a few months ago, was hopeful of freedom and said three months after his release would be spent traveling across different countries for a documentary on his life. At 78, zest for life is something Sobhraj won't be lacking at all.